

BECOMING A MILITARY DISTRICT

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Deepening military cooperation between Russia and Belarus

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by

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Since 24 February 2022 Belarus has been an active enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine. The present Brief^(a) examines the background to this and analyses how military cooperation between Russia and Belarus has developed since 2020^(b). Back then, following the brutal crackdown on the protests contesting the results of the fraudulent presidential elections, Belarus became almost completely isolated from the West. As a result, Minsk's dependence on Russia increased substantially, because political, security, logistical and financial support from Russia became vital for the survival of Lukashenka's regime.

The Brief is composed of four main parts. The first section provides an overview of the main characteristics of Russia-Belarus military cooperation before the events of 2020. The second part charts the most important changes that have taken place in the last one and a half years, focusing on the increasingly frequent joint exercises and operations held by the Russian and Belarusian armed forces, the stationing of Russian troops in Belarus, and the deployment of Belarusian soldiers in Russian-led missions abroad,

Summary

- Although Belarus previously resisted pressure to deepen military cooperation with Russia, after the crackdown on the protests that followed the 2020 presidential election Alexander Lukashenka has displayed less reluctance to engage in closer cooperation, indicating his growing dependence on Moscow.
- Military cooperation between Russia and Belarus comprises multilateral dimensions, including within the institutional framework of the CSTO, and bilateral dimensions, in particular in the framework of the Union State of Russia and Belarus.
- Russia has long been pushing Belarus to host a permanent military base. In March 2021 Lukashenka finally agreed to the presence of a joint Belarusian-Russian military unit, including combat-capable Russian forces.
- Since 2020 joint Russian-Belarusian military manoeuvres have increased significantly. The Union Resolve 2022 exercise saw the largest ever Russian deployment of troops and weaponry to Belarus. This massive deployment proved to be the prelude to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a war in which Belarus is currently playing an active role.
- The intensification of Russian-Belarusian military cooperation has serious regional implications, including for the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative.

as well as the war against Ukraine. The third section forecasts the future development of bilateral military cooperation between Moscow and Minsk, while the last section considers the implications both for the European Union and the Eastern Partnership region.

MILITARY COOPERATION BEFORE 2020

Institutionalised cooperation

Russia and Belarus have been military allies ever since Alexander Lukashenka came to power in 1994. There are four different institutional layers of military cooperation between Moscow and Minsk, comprising two multilateral and two bilateral dimensions. Concerning the first, cooperation in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) focuses mostly on regulatory activities⁽⁵⁾, as well as field and combat training, including regular live-fire exercises held in Russia⁽⁶⁾. The second, strategically and operationally more important framework is the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Established in 2002, the organisation has been slowly but steadily developing its institutional frameworks as well as crisis management capabilities. The CSTO has five different types of joint forces, one of which is the Russia-Belarus CSTO Eastern European Group of Forces⁽⁷⁾. However, CSTO forces have never been deployed in a real-life combat operation due to a lack of unified political will, as well as Russia's reluctance to deploy CSTO troops. The organisation remained on the sidelines during the Kyrgyz crises of 2005 and 2010, as well as during the 2016 and 2020 wars between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and even during the Tajik-Kyrgyz border crisis in 2021, when two CSTO members fought each other. The reluctance of Belarus to commit its soldiers to any missions abroad, stemming from the country's traumatic experiences during the Soviet-Afghan war⁽⁸⁾, accounted in no small degree for the CSTO's inaction, as did Lukashenka's fears that the CSTO might turn into an instrument for Russian intervention that could also one day be used against him.

Bilateral frameworks of military cooperation between Moscow and Minsk are close and multi-faceted. This is primarily due to the fact that the territory of Belarus is of crucial importance to the Kremlin for defending the territory and airspace of the Russian Federation, including the exclave of Kaliningrad.

One of the frameworks, the so-called Union State of Russia and Belarus, is a unique bilateral organisation, established in 1999, which has a well-developed defence policy component. In fact, Belarus has been the main beneficiary of cooperation in the framework of the Union State, as Moscow has provided it with a viable security and defence guarantee: Russian strategic documents keep emphasising that Moscow considers any armed aggression against the Union State as an aggression against Russia⁽⁹⁾. Similarly, the military doctrine of Belarus, adopted in 2016, puts key emphasis on military cooperation with Russia and joint defence of the Union State.⁽¹⁰⁾

Military cooperation within the Union State includes joint defence policy, harmonisation of joint military activities, joint use of military infrastructure, coordination in military construction, coordinated border policy and a number of other issues⁽¹¹⁾. The Union State adopted its first military doctrine in 2001⁽¹²⁾, replaced by a new one in 2018.

In addition to this, there are a series of bilateral defence-related agreements between the two countries, which are outside the frameworks of the Union State. The most important ones concern the Regional Grouping of Forces of Russia and Belarus, established in January 1998,⁽¹³⁾ and the Unified Air Defence System⁽¹⁴⁾. In the framework of the former, should an attack occur, the two countries commit to jointly set up the Regional Grouping of Forces,⁽¹⁵⁾ an army-sized, combined arms formation composed of the entirety of Belarus's armed forces, as well as various Russian units, including Russia's 1st Guards Tank Army.⁽¹⁶⁾ The regular *Union Shield* exercises are held to practise various aspects of this very scenario. Regarding the latter, since 2016 the air defence systems of Russia and Belarus have been functioning in a fully integrated way. In the event of an armed attack, the joint system will be commanded by Russia.⁽¹⁷⁾

Exercises and military presence

Despite the multi-layered, established institutional frameworks, before 2020 Lukashenka had consistently resisted pressure from Moscow to further deepen military cooperation between the two countries, particularly if it would have restrained Minsk's room for manoeuvre in foreign policy.

This stance was particularly visible in the context of the military exercises. For a long time Belarusian forces have regularly participated in joint military exercises with Russia. The largest ones are the quadrennial *Zapad* (West) strategic exercises conducted in

Russia's Western Military District, held since 1999. The key premise of the *Zapad-2017* exercise was to test how Belarus could host Russian military forces, should an external attack necessitate such a deployment. During the *Zapad-2017* drills Russia tried to increase the pre-agreed deployment numbers shortly before the launch of the exercise, but Minsk firmly refused. Furthermore, Belarus invited Western observers to the exercise, both to ensure transparency and also to exclude a scenario whereby Russia could use the manoeuvre to cover an invasion of Belarus.

In terms of military infrastructure, Russia has two military installations on the territory of Belarus, both inherited from Soviet times. A navy communication transmission station, used to communicate with submarines, operates at the town of Vileyka, and a long-range radar station, part of Russia's early warning system, is located near Baranovichi. Russia operates both facilities officially on a lease basis, but free of charge⁽⁴⁶⁾. According to Russian and Belarusian military terminology, neither of these two installations qualify as a military base (*voennaya baza*); instead, they are 'military objects' (*voennyi obyekt*).

Russia has long been pushing Belarus to host a permanent Russian military base too. However, until 2021 Lukashenka resisted this pressure, because a Russian base on Belarusian territory would have considerably reduced his leeway in foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the West. Besides, in the post-2014 context a Russian base would have constituted a major point of contention in Minsk's relations with Ukraine too. In December 2014 Lukashenka explicitly pledged that 'Belarus would never allow other countries to use Belarus' territory for military intervention in Ukraine'⁽⁴⁷⁾. Although between 2013 and 2016 Russia stationed a number of Sukhoi Su-27 fighters on Belarusian airfields, these jets were not there as part of any military base, but solely as a temporary boost to Belarus's own, ageing air defence fighters⁽⁴⁸⁾. Minsk's resistance was so effective that when NATO established its Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States and Poland in 2016, Russia exempted Belarusian territory from the military build-up that it undertook in reaction to NATO's eastward expansion and the military reinforcements took place only on Russian territory, including Kaliningrad⁽⁴⁹⁾.

Military-industrial complex dependencies

In addition to all these aspects, there are also extensive defence industrial ties between Russia and Belarus, creating a predominantly asymmetric, but still somewhat interdependent relationship between

Moscow and Minsk. On the one hand, Belarus is completely dependent on Russia both as a supplier of military hardware and also as the main market for the Belarusian military industry. On the other hand, there are a number of Belarusian-manufactured military products that Russia cannot produce on its own, thus it is still dependent on Belarus for certain items of military equipment. These include, besides sensors and opto-electronic equipment, most importantly wheeled chassis produced by the Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant (MZKT), which serve as platforms for Russia's Topol-M⁽²⁰⁾ and RS-24 Yars missiles⁽²¹⁾, as well as for some versions of air defence systems. Trucks and tractor-trailers produced by another Belarusian automotive factory, the Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ), are also essential for several Russian weapon systems, including the Iskander-M missiles and S-400 air defence systems. Although Russia has made several efforts to reduce the dependency of its strategic nuclear forces

on Belarusian-manufactured chassis⁽²²⁾, so far the Russian automotive industry has not succeeded in producing a suitable replacement in satisfactory numbers⁽²³⁾. Russia's takeover or merger efforts to gain control over these Belarusian companies were also unsuccessful. Hence, Russia's dependence on certain Belarusian military industrial products is likely to continue.

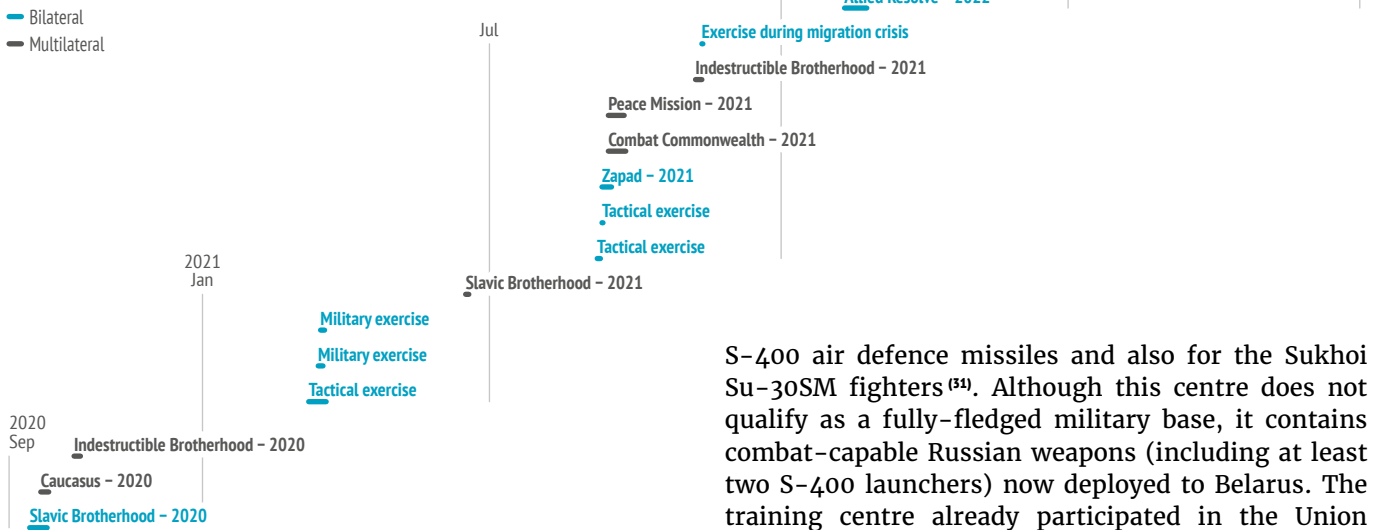
CHANGES SINCE 2020

Since the crackdown on the protests that followed the presidential elections in August 2020 and the subsequent isolation of Belarus from the West, substantial changes have taken place also in the field of military cooperation between Russia and Belarus.

End of the policy of situational neutrality

Even the ongoing transformation of the Belarusian political system, reflected in the constitutional reform, has a military-related dimension. This is particularly so because the new, amended constitution⁽²⁴⁾, which was adopted in a referendum held on 27 February 2022, contains an important change compared to the previous Belarusian constitution, which stipulated that the country pledges to be a nuclear-free zone, and that the state had to be neutral⁽²⁵⁾. This neutrality has long been interpreted in a very flexible way, as Belarus has been a member of the Collective Security Treaty of the CIS, and thereafter the CSTO, since 1994.

Timeline of major joint Russo-Belarusian military exercises



Data: Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2021; Jamestown Foundation, 2021; TASS, 2021 & 2022

Moreover, as described above, Minsk has had a long-standing military alliance with Russia ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, in 2014 Minsk took a neutral stance on the crisis in Ukraine; it did not recognise Russia’s illegal annexation of the Crimea and offered its territory as a site for conflict settlement negotiation over the Donbas⁽²⁶⁾. Indeed Belarus even appeared to be somewhat favourably disposed towards Ukraine: Minsk supplied diesel fuel to Ukraine and maintained military-industrial cooperation too. In other words, this neutrality was situational⁽²⁷⁾ rather than institutional, but until 2020 it existed at least officially. Hence, it is noteworthy that the new constitution removes both the requirement of nuclear-free status and of neutrality⁽²⁸⁾. The text was adopted following a referendum held on 27 February 2022⁽²⁹⁾, so this date marks the official end of Belarusian neutrality.

Russian military presence in Belarus

After years of resisting the presence of Russian combat troops in Belarus, in March 2021 Lukashenka finally agreed to the presence of a joint Belarusian-Russian military unit in Belarus. This is the Joint Air Defence and Air Force Training and Combat Centre, located in the Grodno region, to which Lukashenka agreed in spring 2021⁽³⁰⁾ and which become operational in September 2021. The main task of the centre, subordinated to the Unified Air Defence System, is to train both Belarusian and Russian personnel for those weapon systems that are soon going to be put into service by Belarus, most importantly for

S-400 air defence missiles and also for the Sukhoi Su-30SM fighters⁽³¹⁾. Although this centre does not qualify as a fully-fledged military base, it contains combat-capable Russian weapons (including at least two S-400 launchers) now deployed to Belarus. The training centre already participated in the Union Resolve 2022 exercise (see below).

In addition to the training centre, from September 2021 Russian fighter jets again started patrolling Belarusian airspace, departing from Baranovichi airport, together with their Belarusian counterparts, with both flying modern Sukhoi Su-30SM multi-purpose fighters. Belarus was delivered its first Sukhoi-30s in 2019, in order to gradually replace its ageing fleet of MiG-29s⁽³²⁾, but so far Minsk has only received a handful of them. Hence, joint patrolling of Belarusian airspace, as well as conducting training missions⁽³³⁾, is not only a political gesture, but also a military necessity amidst the current, heightened tensions between Russia, Belarus and the West. Russian Sukhoi-30s operate from Belarus on a rotational basis, so their presence does not equate to the establishment of a military base either. Nevertheless, the fact that Russia has now two combat-capable units in Belarus, albeit jointly operated ones, is a significant change compared to the pre-2020 era.

Russian military manoeuvres in Belarus

Since 2020 joint military manoeuvres on Belarusian soil have increased significantly both in number and in scale. Lukashenka appears to have overcome his earlier reluctance to engage in close military cooperation with Russia, indicating his growing dependence on Moscow. On 1 September 2021 Lukashenka openly declared that Russia and Belarus practically have ‘a single army’, and should a war start, they would fight jointly⁽³⁴⁾. A month later, on 2 October 2021 he even went further and said that Belarus could become ‘a joint military base with Russia’ in case of an external attack⁽³⁵⁾. His remarks demonstrated that the increasingly close military cooperation between Moscow and Minsk has political support from the highest level.

Four years after the previous such exercise, in 2021 Russia held another *Zapad* strategic exercise, together with Belarus. Like its predecessor, *Zapad-2021* lasted a lot longer and involved significantly more Russian forces than officially indicated⁽⁶⁶⁾.

From the perspective of Russia–Belarus cooperation there were plenty of differences. Most importantly, in contrast to his reticence in 2017, in 2021 Lukashenka fully supported the exercise and the hosting of larger Russian formations⁽⁶⁷⁾. He did not seem to object to the threats it could potentially pose to Belarus’s Western neighbours, nor did he invite any observers from the West⁽⁶⁸⁾.

Instead, he declared during the exercise⁽⁶⁹⁾ that in the coming years he expects to receive arms from Russia worth USD 1 billion, which would include the delivery of S-400 air defence systems too.

Russia also dispatched military forces to Belarus in the summer and autumn of 2021, so during the migrant crisis on Europe’s borders unleashed by Lukashenka in an effort to destabilise Poland, Lithuania and, to a lesser extent, Latvia. Somewhat unusually in a migration-related context, instead of sending border guards or humanitarian personnel, Russia conducted a number of demonstrative flights by nuclear-capable strategic bombers in Belarusian airspace in November–December 2021⁽⁷⁰⁾. The Tu-160 and Tupolev Tu-22M3 strategic bombers were accompanied by jet fighters that Russia had supplied to the Belarusian air force. Belarusian and Russian Sukhoi-30 fighter jets also conducted joint air patrols along the Polish border⁽⁷¹⁾. There was also an unannounced joint Russia–Belarus paratrooper exercise held in November 2021 close to the border with Poland.

The occasional presence of Russian bombers or paratroopers in Belarus would not have been much of a novelty.⁽⁷²⁾ However, Russia’s military getting so directly involved in Belarus’s disputes with the West was a phenomenon unseen before 2020.

The deployment of Belarusian forces in the first CSTO ‘peacekeeping’ mission also needs to be mentioned⁽⁷³⁾. Belarus contributed to the operation by deploying soldiers from its Vitebsk-based 103rd Airborne Special Operations Brigade⁽⁷⁴⁾, who were airlifted to Kazakhstan by the Russian air force. Belarus responded so quickly to the decision of the CSTO Collective Security Council on 6 January that Belarusian troops were airlifted out of the country already on the same night and started operating in Kazakhstan next day⁽⁷⁵⁾. On the one hand, the operation again demonstrated the very high level of interoperability

between Russian and Belarusian forces. On the other hand, it abruptly marked a departure from Belarus’s decades-long reluctance to deploy its soldiers in military missions abroad. As Belarus has clearly not forgotten the trauma of Afghanistan, most probably the reason that Minsk agreed to supply troops is that Lukashenka is no longer in a position to obstruct the Kremlin’s ambition to use the CSTO as an instrument to advance its own strategic objectives.

The ‘Union Resolve 2022’ exercise

On 17 January 2022 Russia and Belarus announced that major, joint military drills were going to take place in Belarus between 10 and 20 February 2022, in the framework of the Union State. The exercise, named ‘Union Resolve 2022’ (*Soyuznaya reshimost’ 2022*) was intended to practise repelling an external attack from the western and southern directions. Hence, this manoeuvre, unlike *Zapad-2021*, already implied Ukraine as a source of potential aggression.

Russia moved sizeable forces to Belarus, amounting to several thousand soldiers, constituting the largest-ever Russian deployment of troops and weaponry to the country, including Iskander missiles, S-400 air defence systems, dozens of T-72B3 tanks, BM-27 Uragan multiple-launch rocket systems, engineering vehicles and plenty of other heavy equipment. Although the ‘Union Resolve 2022’ exercise officially ended on 20 February, Russian forces remained in the country after that deadline⁽⁷⁶⁾.

Belarus in the war against Ukraine

Russia escalated the limited war it has been conducting against Ukraine since 2014 into a full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. Belarus has played a key and active role in Russia’s attack from the very beginning, due to a number of reasons. First and foremost, Russia has used the territory and infrastructure of Belarus as a military platform for its war against Ukraine, by operating the troops it had deployed in the framework of the ‘Union Resolve’ exercise. A major Russian offensive against Kyiv has been launched from south-east Belarus. Russian bombers depart from Belarus’s Baranovichi and Lida airfields, and Russia is also operating a Beriev A-50 airborne early warning and control (AEW-C) aircraft from there to coordinate its air operations in Ukraine⁽⁷⁷⁾. Russia has fired several ground-to-ground missiles from Belarusian territory and also launched artillery strikes from there. In addition to all this, Belarusian armed

forces are providing the advancing Russian army with full logistical and military medical support.

While at the time of writing it is yet unclear whether Minsk has also deployed combat troops to Ukraine, the enabling role Belarus has been playing in Russia's war clearly makes the country an integral part of the conflict. Somewhat paradoxically, Belarus's new constitution, which abolished the country's neutrality, was adopted only on 27 February, thus three days after its neutrality *de facto* ceased to exist due to Belarus's active participation in Russia's war against Ukraine.

LIKELY FUTURE TRENDS OF RUSSIA-BELARUS MILITARY COOPERATION

The deepening of military cooperation between Russia and Belarus is an open-ended project. Several more exercises and unannounced rapid deployments of Russian forces are likely to take place, both in order to further improve interoperability⁽⁴⁸⁾ and also to put pressure on the West, in the same way as happened in the autumn of 2021.

It is unlikely that Russia will give up its long-standing plan to establish a fully-fledged military base in Belarus either. Meanwhile, if forces deployed as part of the Union Resolve-2022 exercise and now in the war against Ukraine remain in Belarus, either fully or partially, this will constitute a *de facto* lasting and indefinite Russian military presence in Belarus, despite the official absence of a permanent military base. Further transfer of military hardware is also highly likely, particularly taking into account the obsolete equipment of most Belarusian units, and especially of the air force.

While exploiting Belarus's growing dependence on Russia, Moscow will probably keep striving to reduce its dependence on Belarus-manufactured military hardware, concerning particularly the Strategic Rocket Forces. Hence, further takeover or merger efforts are likely, aimed primarily at Belarus's MZKT and MAZ factories, but also targeting several smaller military industrial enterprises.

The intensifying Russian-Belarusian military cooperation has serious regional implications. Regarding the EU and NATO, the presence of Russia's S-400 air defence missiles in the Grodno region, close to the Polish border, means a considerable extension

of Russia's ability to cover the airspace of parts of Poland and Lithuania, and thus deny air traffic there in the event of an armed conflict against NATO. As soon as Belarus receives its own S-400s, this threat is going to grow further. It is also highly likely that Russia will deploy significant signal intelligence and electronic warfare capabilities to Belarus.

Moreover, the more Russian land forces are present in Belarus and the faster further units can be deployed to the country, the possibility of Russia closing the Suwalki Gap becomes a more plausible scenario⁽⁴⁹⁾. Lithuania openly considers the presence of Russian troops in Belarus as a threat⁽⁵⁰⁾.

In addition to all these elements, based on the success of the deployment of Rapid Reaction Forces to Kazakhstan in January 2022, it is highly likely that CSTO will be more active in addressing future potential crises in its area of operation. By doing so, it may well serve as a conduit for Russia to strengthen and solidify its influence over the CSTO member states, including Belarus.

Last, but not least, the growing dependence of Belarus on Russia will also affect the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative *vis-à-vis* both Belarus and the wider region. As was demonstrated already in 2020, Russia is ready to step up against any political movement that would endanger its strategic positions and interests in Belarus. The deepening bilateral military cooperation provides additional motivation for this, as well as tools and means to interfere in Belarus's domestic affairs, if necessary. In other words, the closer the military cooperation between Moscow and Minsk becomes, the lower will be the chances of the Belarusian democratic opposition having a meaningful influence on how the domestic political situation in the country evolves.

Closer military cooperation between Russia and Belarus is likely to also affect the wider Eastern Partnership region. The more successful Russia is in employing its military forces to achieve political gains, the weaker the soft power-based influence of the EU may become. This will be particularly the case now that Russia has attacked Ukraine, because the war demonstrates both the inability of the EU and NATO to directly outmatch Russia's military might, and their unwillingness to risk a confrontation with Russia.

CONCLUSIONS

As of early 2022, Belarus has become a closer military ally of Russia than it has ever been. Although Russia still does not have a permanent military base on Belarusian soil, the presence of Russian combat-capable forces on Belarusian territory is already established. The interoperability of Russian and Belarusian forces is constantly improving, and, as demonstrated both by the *Zapad-2021* exercise and by the CSTO deployment to Kazakhstan, is already at a very high level. Lukashenka has not only backtracked on his earlier reluctance to allow Belarusian territory to be used as a launching pad for an attack against Ukraine, but since 24 February 2022 Belarus has been taking an active part in the war. Moreover, the growing Russian military presence in Belarus constitutes a threat also to the EU and NATO, but this is no longer a matter of concern for Minsk, in contrast to its attitude prior to 2020.

Russia's growing military influence over Belarus, including the likely stationing of Russian forces, will negatively affect the security of the whole region. This is particularly true regarding the possibility of Russian nuclear-capable weapon systems, such as Iskander-missiles deployed in Belarus. Russian military presence will inevitably further weaken the already very limited possibilities of the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative in the country. It will also increase pressure on the Baltic States and Poland by considerably shortening the available reaction time in the event of any NATO-Russia confrontation. Moreover, the stationing of Russian forces will enable Moscow to considerably strengthen its intelligence and anti-access and area denial (A2AD) capabilities.

The deepening of military cooperation is unlikely to be reversed. Instead, Belarus is apparently on the way to becoming a *de facto* extension of Russia's Western Military District. Hence, all in all, the official removal of neutrality from the new constitution of Belarus is only rubberstamping a reality that Belarus has been rapidly heading towards since 2020, and that has now materialised violently and dramatically following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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